

The Early Clarinet

A Practical Guide

COLIN LAWSON



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Contents

List of illustrations ix

Preface xi

1 The early clarinet in context 1

Introduction 1

Historical performance and the clarinet 2

Clarinet literature 4

The collector 6

Style 7

Interpreting the evidence 8

The current scene 8

2 Historical considerations 10

Aims and aspirations 10

Origin and development of the clarinet 11

The chalumeau and its music 12

Baroque clarinet repertory 14

Classical 15

Romantic 16

A snapshot from 1879 17

The late nineteenth century 18

Early recordings and musical style 20

3 Equipment 22

Aspects of standardisation 22

Classical clarinets 23

Nineteenth-century clarinets 25

Original instruments 31

Copies 32

Mouthpieces	35
Reeds	36
Care and maintenance	38

4 Playing historical clarinets 41

INGRID PEARSON

Introduction	41
Posture	41
Embouchure and reed-position	44
Articulation	47
Fingering	52
Ornamentation	55
Other practical and aesthetic considerations	59

5 The language of musical style 63

Introduction	63
Sources	63
Rhetoric	64
The Romantic era	69

6 Case studies in ensemble music 75

Handel: <i>Overture</i> HWV 424 for two clarinets and horn	75
Johann Stamitz: Clarinet Concerto in B \flat	79
Mozart: Clarinet Quintet K581	83
Weber: Clarinet Concerto No. 2 in E \flat , Op. 74	89
Brahms: Clarinet Trio Op. 114	93

7 Related family members 99

Introduction	99
Special projects: high clarinets	99
Low clarinets	100
Basset horn, basset clarinet	101

Notes 107

Select bibliography 121

Index 124

Illustrations

3.1	Fingering chart for Heinrich Baermann's twelve-keyed clarinet, from Amand Vanderhagen's <i>Nouvelle méthode pour la clarinette moderne à douze clés</i> (Paris, 1819)	page 28
3.2	Copies of ten-keyed B \flat clarinet c. 1810 by Heinrich Grenser (Daniel Bangham, 1991) and two-keyed D clarinet c. 1710 by Jacob Denner (Brian Ackerman, 1983), together with Boehm-system clarinet	33
4.1	The correct way to hold the clarinet, from Ferdinando Sebastiani's <i>Metodo per clarinetto</i> (Naples, 1855)	46
4.2	Table of figures to be avoided by composers for the clarinet, from J. X. Lefèvre's <i>Méthode de clarinette</i> (Paris, 1802)	54
7.1	F. X. Süssmayr, Concerto in D for basset clarinet, autograph sketch, bars 112–25	105

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1 The early clarinet in context

Introduction

Many clarinetists today are familiar with various different types of historical clarinet which have been consistently illustrated in books and journals. Nowadays these instruments are regularly being played throughout the world, giving a quite new perspective to the art of clarinet performance. The various designs of early clarinet will not be reproduced here, since a representative selection is already accessible within the pages of *The Cambridge Companion to the Clarinet* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

During the course of little more than a generation, period performance has indeed become part of mainstream musical life and is pursued with skill and dedication by an ever-increasing circle of performers. Opportunities now exist to commission copies of various types of early clarinets and to perform a wide range of repertory using instruments which would have been familiar to the composers themselves. Given sufficient dedication, any experienced and open-minded modern player can achieve technical command over a wide range of clarinets. An encouragement to initiative here is Joseph Fröhlich's observation from 1810: 'Owing to the different construction and various manners of blowing wind and reed instruments, there are no generally applicable rules of fingering. All one can do is give the usual fingerings and a critique on each note, and, at the same time, to inform the student of the various manners in which the same note can be fingered, in order to make the dark notes brighter and more sonorous, and to improve the bad ones. Consequently, one must really see to it that each player evolves the fingering for himself.'¹

In 1752 the flautist Quantz set out to train a skilled and intelligent musician, remarking that the majority of players had fingers and tongues, but that most were deficient in brains! At the same period C. P. E. Bach warned that players whose chief asset was mere technique were clearly at a disadvantage. Both writers emphasise that if a player is not himself moved by what he

plays he will never move others, which should be his real aim. In our own very different musical climate it is easy to become embarrassed by such sentiments, but in Mozart's day – well before the enthusiasm for virtuosity as an end in itself during the nineteenth century or the veneration for accuracy which has developed during the age of recording – the communication of emotion was an absolute priority. For today's specialist in period performance, the acquisition of instruments and even the technique to play them can only be the starting point; the whole exercise will be severely limited unless harnessed to a feeling for appropriate musical styles. Quantz described music as 'nothing but an artificial language, through which we seek to acquaint the listener with our musical ideas'.² This analogy with oratory implies a range of articulation far removed from the goals of many modern clarinetists, who arguably have moved further in the direction of a smooth, seamless approach than most flautists, oboists or bassoonists.

Historical performance and the clarinet

The upsurge of interest in the early clarinet has made it a subject worthy of specialist study and it is now routinely available as a principal subject at the main conservatoires. But only a few years ago, it would have seemed inconceivable that there could be any apparent advantage in resurrecting clarinets from pre-Boehm days. As late as 1980 the article 'performing practice' in *The New Grove Dictionary* could still claim that repertory after 1750 involves no lost tradition: 'there has been no severance of contact with post-Baroque music as a whole, nor with the instruments used in performing it . . . To hear Beethoven's symphonies played with the same degree of authenticity [as the Horn Sonata] would be no less revealing in sound quality, but the practical difficulties of assembling and equipping such an orchestra are almost insuperable.' Subsequent musical revelations proved such an argument untenable, as period interpretations of Mozart and Beethoven symphonies moved well past the experimental stage, to widespread acclamation. Cycles of Haydn, Mendelssohn, Schumann and even Brahms then gave an enormous impetus to study of the early clarinet, once period orchestral repertory had broken through an artificial divide of 1750.

The movement which was to ignite a smouldering interest in the early clarinet is recounted by Harry Haskell in his book *The Early Music Revival*

(London, 1988). His narrative appraises the activities of musicologists, editors, publishers, makers, collectors, curators, dealers, librarians, performers, teachers and record producers. Haskell shows that baroque music was indeed for a long time the latest period to be examined with a scholarly eye. Indeed, he begins his narrative with Mendelssohn's revival in 1829 of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, in which the orchestra was updated to include clarinets, in the absence of oboi d'amore and da caccia. Eventually at the end of the nineteenth century there began the reproduction of early instruments, initially keyboards, strings and eventually recorders.

Prior to 1939, period performance was well represented in the pre-war recording studio, though generally by renaissance and baroque repertory. The immediate post-war period witnessed recordings of an ever-increasing amount of baroque music. Among projects undertaken (on modern instruments) by Karl Haas and the London Baroque Ensemble were Handel's *Ouverture* for two clarinets and horn and Vivaldi's Concerto RV559 for pairs of oboes and clarinets. The early clarinet was the last of the woodwinds to enter the recording studio. A pioneering venture was the 1969 recording (for Telefunken) of Beethoven's Trio Op. 11 by Piet Honingh, using a five-keyed instrument by Jung of Marseilles. In the 1970s the growing number of period baroque ensembles was supplemented by the Collegium Aureum founded by Franzjosef Maier, which recorded much classical chamber music involving clarinet (played by Hans Deinzer on a generously mechanized boxwood instrument), as well as the first period version of the Mozart Clarinet Concerto in 1973. With the Academy of Ancient Music, Christopher Hogwood moved into later territory than he had inhabited in David Munrow's Early Music Consort; his early projects included symphonies by Arne, as well as the Clarinet Concerto by Johann Stamitz, with Alan Hacker as soloist. Hacker brought an enthusiasm for early instruments to the classical repertory, notably with his own group The Music Party, introducing period performance of music from 1760 to 1830 to a wide public at a time when such projects were scarcely known at all. During the 1970s opportunities in Britain to hear original instruments at first hand became more frequent, for example with the arrival of the Bate Collection in Oxford, a working collection complementing instruments on display at the Horniman Museum and at the Royal College of Music in London, and in Edinburgh's Reid Collection.

Classical performance on a larger scale entered a new era in the early 1980s, with Hogwood's project to record Mozart's complete symphonies. Once they had been recorded on historical instruments, it could soon be demonstrated that the clarinet concertos of Mozart and Weber were idiomatically suited to the kinds of instrument for which they were originally intended. As historical activity spread from the principal and distinctive centres such as England and Holland, many established baroque conductors broadened their horizons to include the classical period. The widespread reproduction of keyboard instruments was followed by flutes and double reeds and eventually led to various makers offering fine copies of early clarinets. The finite number of surviving originals has ensured that replicas are encountered ever more frequently, and this is assuredly something of a loss because (as we shall find later in this book) copies can easily be tuned and customised in a way which emphasises modern as well as period characteristics.

Clarinet literature

In general, historical matters have attracted a much greater clarinet literature than technique or the application of style. The instrument has been the subject of lively discussion in musical journals ever since the time of Mozart. In the early nineteenth century important German periodicals such as the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* and *Cäcilia* devoted attention to it. A couple of generations later, the first edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music* included a wide-ranging article on the clarinet which enumerated its various characteristics and difficulties; it is discussed in detail in Chapter 2. There were complete books devoted to the clarinet in Italian (1887) and German (1904),³ and then in 1916 came an important historical survey from the English amateur Oscar Street.⁴ The change in the clarinet's status since that time is revealed by Street's observation, 'the [Mozart] Concerto is alas! very seldom heard nowadays. I find that it has not been played at a Philharmonic Concert since Willman played it in 1838, and as a Fellow of that honourable old Society I should like to place on record my regret at the neglect of such a beautiful work. I have only heard it played once in its entirety, and that was by Mr. Charles Draper in the early days of the Beecham orchestra . . .'

Adam Carse's general book on wind instruments from 1939 contains a celebrated (if then accurate) description of the chalumeau as 'this will' o th' wisp of wind instruments'.⁵ A post-war landmark was Anthony Baines's *Woodwind Instruments and their History* of 1957, which deals separately with the mechanical and practical aspects of playing modern and historical woodwinds. Its distinctive and far-sighted text includes a fingering chart for the simple-system clarinet. Geoffrey Rendall's article in the fifth edition of *Grove* also compared Boehm and Albert systems on an equal footing: 'the Boehm player circumvents difficulties by nimbleness of mind, by selecting the most convenient among several possible fingerings, the old system player by nimbleness of finger in sliding from key to key.'⁶ Rendall's book on the clarinet (published in 1954) dealt with both practical and historical matters, usefully illustrating a variety of early clarinets. Meanwhile, *The Galpin Society Journal* contained from its beginnings in 1948 a steady stream of articles of interest to clarinetists by R. B. Chatwin, Thurston Dart, Horace Fitzpatrick, Eric Halfpenny, Roger Hellyer, Edgar Hunt, J. H. Van der Meer and others. Oskar Kroll, who had already undertaken important research into the chalumeau, wrote a book on the clarinet published in 1965 (English translation 1968), which had been in preparation as early as 1939.⁷ Kroll brought an important German perspective to the history and repertory of the clarinet. A different, more comprehensive view was offered within a scholarly three-part article (1958) in the German encyclopaedia *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, covering acoustics, ethnic and ancient clarinet types and the European clarinet. Of its three authors, Heinz Becker also published independent articles elsewhere on the eighteenth-century clarinet and on the chalumeau.

Pamela Weston's *Clarinet Virtuosi of the Past* (London, 1971) and *More Clarinet Virtuosi of the Past* (London, 1977) introduced both a biographical and a critical perspective on earlier performers. Jack Brymer's book *Clarinet* (London, 1976) included some valuable historical information for the general reader, as well as some useful photographs of early instruments. His enthusiastic remarks about the early clarinet reflected its then gradual emergence on to the musical scene. More specifically relevant in the present context is Nicholas Shackleton's *New Grove* article 'clarinet', revised in 1984 for *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, whose illustrations include early reeds and mouthpieces. The clarinet has remained a popular

subject for university theses, and David Ross's 'A Comprehensive Performance Project in Clarinet Literature with an Organological Study of the Development of the Clarinet in the Eighteenth Century' (University of Iowa, 1985) is worth investigating for its many descriptions of surviving old clarinets. Albert Rice's *The Baroque Clarinet* (1992) takes an essentially bibliographical approach to an as yet under-researched area. A few clarinet tutors are currently available in facsimile and they are listed, together with most of the books and articles mentioned here, in the *Bibliography of the Early Clarinet* (Brighton, 1986) compiled by Jo Rees-Davies. More recent advice on the technique of playing early clarinets has been concentrated in the journal articles listed in the bibliography, whilst *The Cambridge Companion to the Clarinet* (Cambridge, 1995) includes a chapter by the present author entitled 'Playing historical clarinets'. *Early Music* (from 1973) continues to be an important forum for makers, players, and scholars and authors. Venturing into single-reed territory with increasing regularity, it has included articles on practical concerns by players or scholars such as David Charlton, Eric Hoeprich and Albert Rice. Significantly, it has frequently contained discussion of performance practice issues of direct relevance to clarinetists.

The collector

By comparison with a period string player, the clarinetist must perforce have an extensive collection of instruments. An investigation of the baroque repertory will involve four sizes of chalumeaux, two-keyed clarinets in C and D for Handel and Vivaldi and a later design of D clarinet for the Molter concertos. Within the classical period, Mozart's music alone will require Viennese clarinets in A, B \flat , B and C, as well as basset clarinets in B \flat and A and basset horn in F.⁸ One might also like to have English instruments for repertory such as Mahon or Hook and French instruments for Lefèvre and his compatriots. The early Romantic solo repertory by Weber or Spohr and orchestral parts by Beethoven or Mendelssohn need to be played on a more powerful type of ten- or twelve-keyed clarinet. Again, clarinets in A, B \flat and C will be required and there is an important distinction to be made between German and French designs. For Berlioz, authentic thirteen-keyed

French clarinets are indispensable. When the Boehm system first appeared, clarinets were for a time still being manufactured in boxwood. This is also the material of Richard Mühlfeld's Baermann-Ottensteiner clarinets on which the Brahms chamber works were premièred. Cocuswood was another popular medium, especially for the Albert- (simple-) system clarinets which found special favour in Britain until the inter-war era.

Evidence of various kinds indicates that the clarinet was originally far less standardised than we can imagine. Reeds and mouthpieces are areas where historical propriety and practical convenience need to be delicately balanced; experiments and research of one's own are preferable merely to following current fashion. Relatively few mouthpieces survive intact, even where the clarinet is in good condition. A wide variety of mouthpiece designs existed, often with much smaller slots than we are used to, frequently with a very close lay (though not always surviving in original condition) and usually requiring a reed which is quite narrow and shorter at the base than its modern counterpart. Historical mouthpieces and reeds are discussed in later chapters. The reed was tied on to the mouthpiece with twine until Müller's espousal of the metal ligature near the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁹

Style

Playing different types of early clarinet offers a stimulating artistic and technical experience which can inspire a fresh approach to the modern instrument. Arguably, the very design of the Boehm instrument has encouraged a tonal homogeneity which has diminished the clarinet's character and rhetorical potential. As we have already noted, historical equipment and even technique can only be the first step towards investigating the sound-world of earlier composers. Real understanding of a composer's full expressive range implies an acquaintance with the musical *language* of the time. In recent years the relatively young discipline of performance practice has become a lively subject for debate. Clearly, there was much that a composer did not trouble to write into his scores; he simply expected certain conventions to be observed. Some of these simply no longer exist, while others have undergone significant changes of meaning. Using a clarinet for which a par-

ticular repertory was originally intended can make the music sound more expressive and can make more sense of what the composer actually wrote.

Interpreting the evidence

The very ambiguity of historical evidence means that there will always be more questions than answers. The issues addressed in the central chapters of the parent volume to the present series are all generally applicable to the clarinet repertory to a greater or lesser degree.¹⁰ Thus the application of primary sources involves examination of surviving instruments, as well as iconographical sources, historical archives and literary sources. Treatises for instruments such as violin, flute or keyboards offer philosophical insights into the art and craft of music and make essential reading for any musician wishing to develop a historical perspective. Musical styles are many and various, with national idiom an important element. Specific areas for detailed study include articulation, melodic inflection, accentuation, tempo, rhythmic alteration, ornamentation, extempore embellishment and improvisation. Furthermore, the interpretation of notation implies a knowledge of conditions and practices for which even an autograph score may offer no clues. These might include such central issues as pitch and temperament, constitution of original programmes, orchestral disposition and placement and the role (if any) of the conductor.

The current scene

As performance standards have risen sharply, it has become less fashionable to claim that early music groups are filled with performers who failed to make the grade in the mainstream musical world. It must be admitted that technical facility was grossly undervalued in the early music market a few years ago, but what makes the criticism bite is that early musicians originally prided themselves on being more adventurous and readier to question received opinions. The whole concept of period performance was subjected to detailed scrutiny in a series of articles in *Early Music* in 1984, revised for inclusion in Nicholas Kenyon's penetrating symposium *Authenticity and Early Music* (Oxford, 1988). In his provocative series of essays *Baroque Music Today* Nikolaus Harnoncourt ascribes the

development of the entire movement to the unhealthy artistic environment of today: 'the unwillingness to bring [historical music] into the present, but rather to return oneself to the past . . . is a symptom of the loss of a truly living contemporary music . . . This kind of historical perspective is totally alien to a culturally vital period.'¹¹ Whatever the degree of truth here, early instruments have above all made musicians think about style in a constructive way, with some spectacular results already applied to 'modern' ensembles.